

Small issues ==> bigger communications problems

In the past several weeks, I've noticed a bunch of small communications issues with different organizations. None of them is big enough to merit a blog post, but they do cause bigger communications problems.

Making it extra hard to reach you

I met a graphic designer at an event a couple of weeks ago. I sent her a follow up email, and got an automated reply back from her email service telling me it didn't recognize me and I would have to reply to the reply, so that I could be whitelisted. I've never seen that before, and I get why she does it. We are all bombarded by spam and other unsolicited email. But when you add an extra step to contacting you, especially when you've given me your personal email on a card, you are creating an obstacle to communication and slowing down any potential business. You have to balance accessibility with the desire for less email. I think if you are a business, you must be accessible.

Not including crucial information

The other day I visited microsite for an upcoming conference. It did not list the venue where the conference would be taking place, just the city and state. I've seen some conference websites that don't list the full date of the conference. And many don't list the price, but force you to hit the register button to find out how much it costs. If you are considering attending any event, you need certain information—where, when, how much and why. If your event page or site does not include crucial information, you are just making it hard for people to decide to attend your event.

Email from unknown senders

The other day I got an email from someone named Orlando. My first instinct was to delete, but something about the headline made me open it. It turns out that Orlando is a new employee at an organization from which I get a newsletter. And it was an organizational newsletter. I will never understand why organizations think it's a good idea to send email from individuals rather than the organization. Unless you're well known already, most people will not recognize you as the new CEO or communications director of an organization.

If your organization recently rebranded or changed its name, you may have to send an initial email from your old name. Last year, I received an email from an organization I had never heard of and I was on the brink of hitting delete. It was communications related, so I figured I must have met someone from that organization at some point, but I wasn't sure. It turns out that it was a new name for an old organization.

Opening external links in the same window

For the life of me, I don't understand why so many organizations want to lose visitors to their websites. And yet, it happens more often than not than when you click on a link, such as the Twitter feed or LinkedIn profile, you are transported out of the organization's website to the other website. It doesn't take too much coding knowledge to have links open in new windows. That way, visitors can still be on your site and view the outside site.

Remember user experience, always.

All of these issues point to one overarching theme: user experience. What do users (visitors to your website, potential customers, potential supporters) experience when they interact with your communications? Are you considering what users need in order to do business with you? As the small issues I described above show, many organizations are not considering their users at all. And that's a big communications problem.

You need more than a gut feeling

At an event last week, I met the owner of a local pizza shop. This pizza shop, which opened about a year ago, is located near me, and seems pretty busy, especially on weekends. I asked him how it's doing. The pizza shop owner immediately said it was doing poorly, and he said the parking situation was to blame. That seemed strange to me since there's plenty of garage parking, which, with validation, is free for two hours. He told me that it doesn't matter, because psychologically, people don't like to pay for parking. And here's a direct quote from him: "I have friends who can spend \$500 on dinner but they won't pay for parking."

OK. I am sure there are people who avoid going places where they have to pay for parking. But I also don't think free parking with validation, and a couple bucks an hour after is the one reason people will avoid going out to dinner.

I have been thinking about this situation for a few days, and I have concluded that this shop owner is looking for an easy excuse for what may be poor business and marketing decisions on his part.

Here are three possible mistakes he has made:

Not scouting or researching the location carefully enough. This particular location has several other restaurants, and the parking situation has not changed in several years. He could have asked the other restaurants if they felt the

parking was a challenge. He could have determined how many people walk or take public transportation to get here and how many people drive, and from where. He could have checked out if people complain about parking.

Biting off more than he can chew. This particular restaurant took over two spaces (one had been a restaurant and the other a shoe store). It is a very large place with both indoor and outdoor seating. Perhaps the space is too big with a rent that is too high to support the amount of people that will eat out here.

Not doing enough marketing (and marketing poorly). When the place opened, I joined the Facebook page for it. It seems that they are doing a few things to entice the community, like a trivia night and a pet adoption event. Now, I am not sure how having a pet adoption event at a restaurant is even a legal idea, and at best is a bit strange idea that may attract pet lovers. I have seen little to promote events in the community and very little creativity. Also, and I kid not, the sponsored Facebook ads promote their top sirloin beef burgers. This is a pizza joint and they should focus on their area of expertise. If you want a burger while everyone else wants pizza, it's good they have alternatives for you. But if you want a really great burger, you are not going to a pizza restaurant for it.

Perhaps this pizza place owner's gut told him that parking is the real issue. But a gut feeling does not mean that it's the correct reason to explain a situation. If he truly wants to improve his situation, he'd commission market research and/or hire a restaurant marketing consultant. He needs facts and actions rather than the feeling that parking, something that will not change and he cannot control, is hurting his business.

What do you think? Does it all amount to parking or may there be other reasons?

Are you making the best business decisions for your marketing?

Yesterday, a friend and I met to have lunch at a new pupusa place in Bethesda that we'd read about. (In case you don't know, pupusas are an absolutely delicious Salvadoran specialty of stuffed thick corn tortillas that are griddled.)

When the pupusa place first opened, it was covered in Bethesda Magazine online (I don't know if it was in the print version). The article stated that the pupusa place was sharing the kitchen with a Japanese restaurant. I assumed it was next door to the Japanese restaurant, but it turns out that it is not separate at all.

I looked up the address online, and set out. Once I got to the block the restaurant was supposed to be on, I walked up and down the street not seeing sign for it anywhere. I noticed a Japanese place, but there was no indication that they served pupusas there. I called the number listed on the pupusa place's Facebook page. I said I was on their street but couldn't find them. The guy who answered told me he was INSIDE the Japanese restaurant, and that they normally only do take out, but that we could sit inside the restaurant.

My friend and I went in, and told the hostess that we wanted to eat pupusas. She told us that it was take out only, but when I told her I had spoken to the pupusa guy and he'd told me we could sit inside, she let us sit in the bar area, and

even took our order.

When the pupusas came out, the waitress realized we needed forks and knives since it's kind of hard to eat stuffed tortillas with chopsticks. It took her another few minutes to reappear with forks for us.

Even with all the hoops to jump through, these pupusas were absolutely delicious, and we both really enjoyed our lunch. We decided that the next time we'd call it in as a takeout order, that is, if this place manages to stay in business.

This pupusa place faces many marketing challenges that are related to its business decision to be inside of a Japanese restaurant. Here are the top issues:

- No signage whatsoever
- No clarity on its Facebook page indicating their physical location inside the Japanese restaurant
- Not a natural fit in cuisines
- No menu or any printed materials
- No clarity on being a takeout business

I am not sure how this place can surmount these difficulties. An article in Bethesda Magazine, and one Yelp review are not sufficient publicity. This place has to rely on word of mouth and even more, on people specifically searching for pupusas in Bethesda.

I'd recommend that the "restaurant" seek out it's own space, even if only a food truck. Failing that, I would recommend it figure out a way of having a sign and a menu available within the Japanese restaurant. And definitely make it perfectly clear on its Facebook page that it's take out only.

The danger of letting junior staff handle your communications

Holiday marketing goes wrong

This past weekend, I got an email from retailer Eddie Bauer with the subject line “Happy Memorial Day.” Now, last time I checked, Memorial Day is a holiday that commemorates and honors soldiers who have died in battle. It’s a solemn day, meant for reflection, gratitude, and mourning. It is not meant to be a happy occasion.

And Eddie Bauer was hardly alone. Grammarly, purportedly a website/app about proper word usage, also wished its readers a “happy Memorial Day.” And Walgreens, the drugstore, had a TV commercial that wished viewers a happy Memorial Day and sent regards and gratitude to the troops. Again, Memorial Day is not about those currently serving, it is about those who died while serving.

Ivanka Trump’s company got a bit of negative publicity because it tweeted how to make champagne popsicles to “celebrate” Memorial Day. You do not celebrate Memorial Day, you observe it.

These are mistakes and missteps that come from *assuming* you know something rather than actually knowing it.

These sad examples of holiday marketing show a deep lack of knowledge and understanding. They are mistakes that seem to come from people who have little breadth and depth. That’s what I mean by junior staff. Junior staff members are not

necessarily young, but they are inexperienced, have little knowledge, don't always understand context, and may make poorly thought out decisions. Junior staff may be aces at the tactics, like posting to social media, but they aren't versed on strategy and communications goals.

When grownups handle communications

Over the Memorial Day weekend, Budweiser was running a promotion in which a portion of beer sales proceeds would be given to Folds of Honor, a charity that provides educational scholarships to families of fallen service members. In all aspects, this is a smarter and much more appropriate marketing tactic than the Memorial Day greetings listed above. It shows an understanding of the meaning of the holiday, and does something to give back (and thus, honors). Budweiser gets that people like to have cookouts and drink beer over the long holiday weekend, so it is taking advantage of a behavior and making it be worthwhile both for the bottom line and for what the holiday stands for.

Understand what it means and how it's best acknowledged

Holidays make easy marketing markers. Every store in this country uses the different holidays to sell something. If it's Fourth of July, get your flag themed whatever (t-shirts, cakes). If it's Thanksgiving buy some Pilgrim/turkey themed stuff. There are pastel colors and rabbits to celebrate Easter.

Yet, not all holidays are the same. Some are religious, some are patriotic, some are celebratory and some are solemn. Understanding what the meaning of a holiday is, and how people celebrate or commemorate it, goes a long way in ensuring that you won't be making a junior-level, major marketing mistake.

Did you notice any Memorial Day marketing missteps? How do you feel about using a solemn holiday like Memorial Day for marketing purposes? Let me know in the comments.

How to run your organization into oblivion

About a decade ago, I was on the board of a small nonprofit that provided educational programming. I lasted all of a few months since I was fighting a losing battle with the other board members and a spectacularly uninformed (and very young) executive director.

This nonprofit had very little money but insisted on a color brochure printed on heavy paper, listing their courses. The ED would then mail it first class (read, the expensive way) because it would take too long to prepare it for the cheaper, bulk/nonprofit rate.

Among the things I suggested was to print the brochure on cheaper paper (like newsprint), use the bulk rate, and to consider going all electronic instead. All these ideas were dismissed. One board member thought it was crucial to print the brochure on good paper because it made it seem more serious (?). The ED was balking at using the bulk rate because it meant pre-sorting the brochure. And another board member said that many people wanted the printed brochure and would never abide an electronic format.

Like I said, it was a losing battle and I believe that there's no sense in discussing change with people who don't want to change.

Here we are a good ten years later, and I just got their latest brochure. Yes, I am still on the mailing list even though I have not signed up for a class or donated any money or shown any interest whatsoever. It is still printed on heavy paper, and has full color (which adds to the expense). They

are now using the nonprofit/bulk rate. When you use use the bulk rate, you have to be aware that delivery will take longer than using first class postage. Apparently, it is not something that this nonprofit understands. I got the brochure yesterday (May 10). The front cover has a banner telling me spring classes begin on April 26, 2017.

This nonprofit continues to print an expensive brochure. However, it doesn't print it out with enough lead time to be able to overcome the slower bulk delivery rate. In effect, this is a complete waste. If you are using a brochure as your only means to communicate your offering, then it better be timely.

And, it seems this organization does not review its database. It continues sending out brochures to people that have not indicated any interest in years. Of course, this adds to the cost of the printing and mailing.

Can you imagine if they had provided this brochure electronically? They would be able to send it out at precisely the right time. They would be able to gauge interest from the open and click rates. They would be able to scrub their lists of any bad addresses. They would increase their reach through the ability to share online. But why change?

Here's how you run your organization to the ground: you waste your precious resources and keep doing it until you have nothing left. You keep doing things the way you always have even though it has never been cost-effective. You don't adapt.

Sigh.

Editing makes everything better!

Over the weekend, I went on walking tour of Georgetown history. In case you don't know it, Georgetown is a historic neighborhood in Washington, D.C. and home to Georgetown University. Georgetown has been around for a long time—it even predates the city of Washington—since it was founded as a port on the Potomac River in 1751. As you can imagine, there's a lot of history there. A lot.

(Check out this photo tour from the Georgetown website)

Lots of stuff has happened in and around here

The tour started on the Georgetown Waterfront, right on the banks of the Potomac River, not far from the Key Bridge. The guide pointed out the Kennedy Center and the Watergate Hotel (both of which are NOT in Georgetown, but are also on the banks of the Potomac). And he started talking about the scandals associated with both those buildings. Then he gave an anecdote about John Quincy Adams and how he nearly drowned in the Potomac River. Then we walked on, and the tour guide told us a story about a family that had traveled to Georgetown on the C&O Canal in a barge, and how a fire broke out and killed three of their young children. He then showed pictures of the graves of these kids, graves which are located in Maryland. Then, we switched to 1985, and to discussing KGB spy Aldrich Ames and where he met his handlers (in a bar near the Waterfront). And to discussing the buildings along the Waterfront. And the construction of the C&O Canal. And the

unsolved murder of a purported lover of John F. Kennedy, whose body was found near the C&O and who had lived in Ben Bradlee's home in Georgetown. And we went to the oldest structure in Georgetown, the Old Stone House. And then to a bank that had been a hospital during the Civil War, and where Louisa May Alcott was a nurse.

(There was much, much more...)

And he kept going

After two and half hours we weren't done. The guide said we had a good 45 minutes left. As interesting as it was, the heat (it was near 90 and very humid) and the hour (it was near 6:00 p.m.) convinced me it was time to go home.

When I got home, I was reflecting on the tour and decided it could have been much improved by some editing. The tour guide suffered from what many writers do—the desire to throw as much information as possible to show the breadth and depth of knowledge. But so much information can become amorphous—lacking in structure—to such an extent that it becomes irrelevant. He also had no overarching theme. There was little to connect the unresolved murder of a woman in the 1960s to the Old Stone House or to how divided Georgetown was during the Civil War. He also had too many asides—as important as the Watergate was to American politics, it does not belong in a Georgetown focused tour.

In writing, editing means deciding what to leave in and what to take out. Editing means tightening up concepts and getting rid of wordiness. Editing means finding focus.

For the Georgetown walking tour, we could start editing by deciding to stick to a time period (Civil War or the 1800s), or to a specific type of event (murders, spying, politics) or to a specific area (Waterfront, N Street). This would give it a tighter focus and more meaning. And in this case, it would've also have shortened the tour.

Editing does make everything better!

Successful companies are customer-focused

United learns the hard way what's important

As you no doubt have seen by now, United Airlines has been forced to make several changes in the wake of the customer abuse incident seen around the world (where a passenger was forcibly removed from a plane and injured in the process). United has now released a report that concludes it let company policies trump customer's rights, and is now making changes to focus on the customer. You can read more details in this [Washington Post article](#): United dragging report: 'Our review shows that many things went wrong that day.' Also, today, United placed a full-page ad in the Washington Post (and I assume other large dailies) apologizing for its actions and outlining the policy changes.

It took very negative publicity and its consequences to make United realize that customers are the reason for being of any company. Without customers, a company simply does not exist. We know that companies that are more customer focused are also better regarded and therefore more successful. Southwest Airlines comes to mind.

UX is about your customers

All this brings me to UX (user experience) and how important it is. UX is being customer- focused when it comes to

designing your website/app. If you don't consider UX when you design, you are not being customer-friendly. It's that simple.

Verizon FIOS On Demand versus Fandango Movies on Roku

Take the example of Verizon FIOS' On Demand screen versus Roku's Fandango Movies screen.

Verizon re-designed their On Demand screen a couple of months ago. They made fonts and images smaller, they crowded the images together and they changed the categories. Adding to that, the background is dark, making it hard to see the writing. To find out whether a movie is available for purchase or rental, you have to click on the title and only then will you be able to see what it costs.

Fandango has several categories on the left hand side of the screen, starting with "New movies to buy" and "New movies to rent." The background is a light color, the images are slightly bigger than Verizon's, and easy to read. Just by scrolling through the titles you can see the price of the movie, its Rotten Tomatoes rating, its MPAA rating, and its length.

Fandango most definitely considered UX when designing its movie screen. It's clear they thought about how customers search for movies, and what information (cost, time commitment, ratings) they need to make a decision. In contrast, the Verizon On Demand screen UX is plain horrible. It's hard to search, hard to find the information you need, and in my opinion, it's just ugly. Oh, and Fandango movie rentals cost less than Verizon's.

Think about your customers, and it will pay off

In my case, I have been renting movies from Fandango and not from Verizon. I definitely find the Fandango interface easier to deal with. Additionally, I voiced my concerns to Verizon, and so far, they've made no changes. I don't know if the

redesign has affected sales, but I wouldn't be surprised.

Your customers and their experience with your company/brand/organization has to be your first concern. If customers are mistreated, they simply will not come back. And in this age of social media, any negative publicity is amplified. Your customer's bad experience can be shared over and over.

Being customer-focused and thinking about their user experience will go a long a way in making any organization successful.

How to be better at communication than Sean Spicer

THIS POST HAS BEEN UPDATED.

What is good communication? In essence, it's getting your

point across to the people who need to hear it. It's having those people (your audience) understand what you are saying, and be able to act on that information if necessary. Also, the information you pass on must be credible. Good communication, therefore, is built on clarity and trust.

If anything, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer has shown us that some people are better communicators than others. Spicer is not example of how to do communications well, but rather, of what not to do. Thankfully, we can draw lessons from his ineptitude. Following are five points to being a better communicator.

Understand your subject matter very well

If you don't understand something yourself, you have zero chance of explaining it (well) to someone else. Yes, this means you have to do some studying (or cramming). It means you have to ask people who know more about the subject to explain it to you. It may even mean looking at charts and graphs.

If you don't know what you are talking about, someone will be quick to point it out to you. Recently, this happened to Sean Spicer. During a press conference last week, Spicer showcased his ignorance about Hitler and the Holocaust by saying that Hitler didn't use chemical weapons (he did), and then when questioned, corrected himself by saying Hitler only used gas at "holocaust centers" but not against his own people (they are called concentration camps and many Germans were killed there). When his errors were pointed out, Spicer had to apologize often and profusely. The Anti-Defamation League even sent him a letter offering to conduct a private Holocaust education training for him and his staff. I don't know if Spicer took the ADL up on its offer, but I think he would greatly benefit from it and/or a visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Use only words that you completely understand and can define

Spicer regularly uses the wrong words. He recently said something couldn't be *quantified*, when he meant that it couldn't be *qualified*. In his defense, this is a common mistake, especially in speaking. When you write, you have a bit more time to figure out the words you are using. The bottom line is this: If you *think* you know what a word means, but you can't define it, don't use it. Also, remember that using big words, especially incorrectly, will make you appear to be trying too hard, and being ignorant too boot.

Check your facts and statistics

If you are going to use any numbers or other facts that can be easily looked up, make sure that they are accurate and correct. Sean Spicer famously trotted out some made up statistics about Trump's inauguration crowds. Those things can be verified, and if you are using incorrect numbers, you are threatening your own credibility.

Don't exaggerate

With a boss who is fond of hyperbole, Spicer also tends to exaggerate. Everything is the best or the worst, terrible or fantastic. As any communicator knows, exaggeration also threatens credibility.

Be likeable

Sean Spicer is a very combative person. This may have served him well when he was the spokesperson for the party out of power, but it is making him unlikeable. By constantly fighting with the White House press corps, or by belittling their questions, or by refusing to answer questions, or by mocking people, Spicer is ensuring that his attitude becomes the story.

It's really important.

Trustworthy and reliable communications have become even more important and necessary in this world of fake news, where bots and fringe political groups are working hard to muck up the information that is available. Taking the time to study your subject and work on your credibility will go a long way to making you a better communicator than our current White House press secretary.

Is there anything you would add to the five points I have listed above? Please share in the comments.

UPDATE:

I am not the only one who thinks Spicer is bad at what he does. Today, New York Magazine had this post: [By Being Bad at His Job, Sean Spicer Nearly Causes Market Panic](#). Because Spicer does not bother to learn his subject well, he says inaccurate things, and in his role, his statements have consequences.

Are we seeing more media crises?

This week featured two highly publicized and far-reaching media crises. One was the United Airlines situation, where a passenger was forcibly removed (and hurt in the process) from the plane, after he had been seated and had not agreed to “voluntarily” leave the aircraft. And the other involved White

House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, who clumsily compared Syria's Bashar al-Assad to Adolf Hitler, and then showed great ignorance about just what Hitler did during World War II.

Twitter outrage

I saw both these situations unfold on social media (specifically, Twitter), and was able to add my observations to many others, both using hashtags and Twitter handles. Social media outrage appears to have caused both United and Sean Spicer to apologize profusely for their mistakes. In today's *Washington Post*, Kathleen Parker argues that in the United case, the Twitter outrage (or "mob" as she calls it) was able to bring the situation to light and make change happen.

It seems that we have more media crises these days than before—but like Parker argues, what has changed is the ability to get these situations in front of more people, more quickly, through social media. So, in fact, we may not be having more crises, but rather more exposure for and to these crises.

Changes...

It seems that United, and to some degree Sean Spicer, have still not adapted or recognized that the media landscape has changed dramatically. Anyone with internet access and a social media account can share their ideas, opinions, facts and more damning, their video. Also, anyone with a smartphone has the ability to create video on the spot, and then share it immediately.

Ten years ago, if a passenger had been dragged off a plane, there would have been no record of it outside of the memories of the other passengers on the plane. Similarly, Sean Spicer's words would have received criticism later (if at all), not during his press briefing. Fewer people would've been exposed to these situations.

More “eyeballs” available

Today’s media crises are happening not because spokespeople and companies are screwing up more, but because more people are seeing it happen. It would behoove any public relations/communications practitioner to internalize that most everything can be publicized very quickly, and may even have incontrovertible visual proof with it.

Doing too much marketing?

There’s a real estate guy who specializes in selling homes in my neighborhood. He is very eager to work with me. I know this because I receive marketing stuff from him constantly. I get a jar of (branded) apple butter on my doorstep every fall. I get a property report, hung on my doorknob on a quarterly basis. I get a magnetic calendar every December. All told, I get at least six direct marketing pieces from this guy every year. As does everyone in my community.

As a communications consultant, I understand what his rationale and motivations may be:

- Gain/retain name recognition
- Stand out from the crowd
- Appear neighborly
- Show he is local and understands the community.

On a personal basis, I feel this guy is making way too much of an effort to get my business. And I feel his marketing efforts are intrusive.

But is this real estate guy doing too much marketing? The answer comes down to doing some calculations (yes, there’s

math involved).

The true test of whether you are doing too much marketing has to do with the value of a customer and how much you are willing to spend to acquire said customer.

The value of a customer

Your first calculation will be to determine the value of a customer. To do this, you, will have to calculate how much money a customer's business generates for you, in terms of current transaction, future transactions, and also including the potential value of any referred business.

Your marketing costs

The second calculation you will have to do is to figure out how much you are spending on marketing. To do this tally up all marketing related costs such as printing, advertising spending, distribution, consulting/design fees, website, memberships, and so forth. You may also want to include your time.

Cost per acquisition

Your final calculation is to figure out your acquisition cost per customer. So say you spent \$10,000 on marketing in a year. You obtained five customers from that marketing effort. That means you spent \$2,000 per customer acquired.

Which means

If the spending to acquire each customer exceeds the value of the customer to your business, your acquisition cost may be too high.

I don't know how much the real estate guy spends on his marketing, nor do I know what value his customers generate, but I sure hope he has done this calculation. If not, he may

be doing too much marketing.